

THE NAME OF GOD, THE NAME OF THE ROSE, AND THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

JOSEPH DAN

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

I

The concept of the divine name, its meanings and powers, cannot be separated from the concept of the divine language, which is a basic, non-mystical constituent of Judaism. The world was created by the word of God, by his utterances, therefore language evidently preceded the creation, and certainly was before human beings and their communicative needs existed. The blueprint for the creation, according to Jewish tradition,¹ was scriptures, the torah, which pre-existed before the creation and God “was looking at it and creating the world.” Language, formulated into a text, thus guided God in that process. Divine language has been used to give framework to human communication—speech and writing as divine gifts to man; it has been used for communication between man and God in the theophanies and revelations; it has been used to create the concept of infinite, eternal meaning incorporated within the sacred text and deciphered by midrashic hermeneutics. On a different level, language as a divine instrument explained the process and nature of creation itself. In all these aspects, divine language retained its communicative and instrumental nature.² Language may be divine

¹ Bereschit Rabba I:1; see: *Bereschit Rabba mit Kritischen Apparat und Kommentar* von J. Theodor, Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965, additional corrections by Ch. Albeck, pp. 1-2 and the notes there.

² It seems that today the opposite view, seeing language as an intensely human phenomenon, is increasing in power, and we are actually returning to the ancient Greek scientific view, which identified humanity by the power of speech, which separates humans from animals. Two major books have been recently published, demonstrating the comprehensiveness of this concept and the far reaches of its conclusions. See: Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: Morrow 1994 (the title is not completely accurate: the mind does not create language but grammar. Particular languages are the result of the particular developments of different peoples); Ray Jackendoff, *Patterns in the Mind: Language and Human Nature*, New York: Basic Books 1994. These two forceful presentations conclude almost a half-century of development of this school. In the context of this study one should be reminded of the fact that Noam Chomsky formulated his concepts half a century ago in the context of the study of modern Hebrew, the language in which he was proficient when he started his linguistic work.

in all these formulations, but it remains a means. Language embodies within it the infinite wisdom of God and His creative powers, which are revealed, in a limited form, in the created world, serving various functions.

In the concept of the holy name of God, language stops being a means and becomes an independent divine essence, in which language and divinity are united. The holy name of God is not an expression of the divine: it is the essence of divinity itself. It is not revelation, it is the Revealer. It is not the instrument of creation, but the Creator. This is the culmination of the process which began with the appearance of the concept of scriptures: God has become a linguistic entity, His essence incorporated within a linguistic phenomenon. In this concept, indeed, the distinction between religion and mysticism becomes a most tenuous one.

This complex spiritual process is best explained by the juxtaposition of Jewish and Christian attitudes concerning the holy name, which is also the comparison between Hebrew and Greek (or Latin) discussions of the subject. One of the most profound expressions of Christian mysticism in all its long and variegated history is the pseudo-Dionysian treatise, *The Divine Names*. This text, together with other works attributed to Dionisius of Areopagita,³ had a profound influence on subsequent Christian mysticism. Despite the intense neo-Platonic character of the speculations of this treatise, its adherence to the scriptural texts is deep-rooted, and many sections in it are essentially exegetical. The mystical attitude of the author is almost a text-book one, starting from a radical negation of sensual and intellectual perceptions,⁴ and instead using scriptures: "Let us therefore look as far upward as the light of sacred scripture will allow, and, in our reverent awe of what is divine, let us be drawn together toward the divine splendor."⁵ The negation of sensual perception and intellectual human faculties is complete and radical: "Just

³ See Acts, 17:31. The mystical works of Pseudo-Dionysius are usually attributed to an anonymous neo-Platonic Christian mystic who flourished in the sixth century. For nearly a millennium, Christian mysticism developed under the impact of this intensely spiritual as well as profoundly philosophical small library, so much so that one of the greatest historians of Christian mysticism declared his inability to distinguish between Christian mysticism and mystical neo-Platonism (see W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, London: Methuen 1899). A vast library of research has developed around these texts. A recent comprehensive presentation of Dionysian mysticism is included in: B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, New York: Crossroad 1991, pp. 157-182, and detailed bibliography there. A recent study of the subject of the apophatic language of this and other works is that of Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press 1994 (see especially pp. 14-62).

⁴ For a detailed discussion see J. Dan, In Quest of a Historical Definition of Mysticism; the Continental Approach, *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993), pp. 58-90.

⁵ I am using one of the most recent translations of the text, that of C.E. Rolt and J. Jones, included in: *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works*, New York: Paulist Press 1987. This volume includes translations by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, notes by Paul Rorem and Introduction by Rene Roques, Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean Leclercq and Karlfried Froehlich.

as the senses can neither grasp nor perceive the things of the mind, just as representation and shape cannot take in the simple⁶ and the shapeless, just as corporeal form cannot lay hold of the intangible and incorporeal, by the same standard of truth beings are surpassed by the infinity beyond being, intelligences by that oneness which is beyond intelligence. Indeed, the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process."⁷ Human facilities cannot conceive any part of the mystical truth. It is only scriptures which open a window—if correctly interpreted—to some glimpse of that divine Truth:

"We learn of all these mysteries from the divine scriptures and you will find that what the scriptures writers have to say regarding the divine names refers, in revealing praises, to the beneficent processions of God. And so all these scriptural utterances celebrate the supreme Deity by describing it as a monad or henad, because of its supernatural simplicity and indivisible unity."⁸ The author saw in the divine names that part of scriptures which is most revealing concerning the hidden, mystical nature of God. The power of the divine name is demonstrated in the New Testament by the power of the name of Christ,⁹ so that the mystic can feel that he is conservatively following ancient concepts when he develops his own mysticism of the divine names.

But what does he mean by the term "name?" On the one hand, the author recognizes that there is a group of names which is beyond revelation, beyond linguistic expression of any kind.¹⁰ But he continues: "And yet on the other hand they give it many names, such as 'I am Being,' 'life,' 'light,' 'God,' the 'truth.' These same wise writers, when praising the Cause of everything that is, use names drawn from all the things caused: good, beautiful, wise, beloved, God of gods, Lord of lords, Holy of Holies, eternal, existent, Cause of the ages. They call him source of life, wisdom, mind, word, knower, possessor beforehand of all the treasures of knowledge, power, powerful and King of Kings, ancient of days, the unaging and unchanging,"

⁶ "simple" in this context means the opposite of "complex," something which cannot be divided into its constituent parts. Only the divine, therefore, can be "simple." In medieval Hebrew the term was translated as פשוט, and reserved for the descriptions of the unity of God.

⁷ Pp. 49-50.

⁸ P. 51.

⁹ For instance, Acts 4:10-12.

¹⁰ "Realizing all this, the theologians praise it by every name—and as the Nameless One. For they call it nameless when they speak of how the Supreme Deity, during a mysterious revelation of the symbolical appearance of God, rebuked the man who asked: 'What is your name?', and led him away from any knowledge of the divine name by countering: 'Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?'" (p. 54). The biblical scene referred to is that of Gn. 32:29, the struggle between Abraham and the mysterious power on the Yabok. "wonderful" is the translation of the Hebrew פלאי, which in this context actually means "mysterious."

and so on.¹¹ It is quite clear that this list of appellations of the divine, collected from the Old and New Testaments, is a semantic one: these are terms which convey some meaning on the linguistic level, and their significance can be found in their semantic nature. The author is aware of the partial and incomplete nature of the semantic information given in this way, yet he uses language in the only way he can: words which convey a specific meaning. The concept of symbolism is the one which enables him to hint at the existence of a mystical, meta-semantic significance to these terms.

For the author of the treatise *The Divine Names*, the Greek words collected from the text of the scriptures denote names which are words, despite the deep awareness of the mystic of the vast distance separating the essence of the divine from human linguistic expression. He does not conceive of a name which is not a word on the semantic level, a group of letters and syllables which does not convey meaning as words do. Similar discussions of divine names abound in all the three scriptural religions. Thus, for instance, the great twelfth-century Sufi leader, Hadrat Abd-al-Qadir al-Jilani, describes in his treatise *The Secret of Secrets*¹² the twelve divine names which are a part of the "ladder of ascension" of the mystic.¹³ In every stage of the spiritual process, the mystic pronounces one of the holy names of God, and this name both signifies his achievement of this stage and enables him to proceed to the next:¹⁴ "After the inner purification, one must recite the Names of the attributes of Allah, which will kindle the light of Allah's beauty and grace. It is in that light that one hopes to see the Ka'aba of the secret essence. Allah ordered His prophets Abraham and Ishmael to this purification . . . After these preparations the inner pilgrim wraps himself in the light of the holy spirit, transforming his material shape into the inner essence, and circumambulates the Ka'aba of the heart, inwardly reciting the second divine Name—Allah, the proper name of God . . . There he stands reciting the third Name—hu . . . then he recites the fourth Name—haqq, the Truth, the name of the light of Allah's essence—and then the fifth name, HAYY,

¹¹ Pp. 55-56, and see there for the biblical references for each of these appellations.

¹² *The Secret of Secrets* by Hadrat Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, interpreted by Shykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society 1992. A previous German translation by Alma Giese under the title: *Enthüllungen des Verborgenen*, Köln: Al-Kitab, 1985, and a detailed bibliography there, pp. 194-200.

¹³ Pp. 86-87 et *passim*. The mystical attitude of al-Jilani towards language is apparent also in his concept of prayer, in which insistence on the semantic message is mixed with the quest for transcending language into the realm of the mystical silent prayer.

¹⁴ This process is similar, to some extent, to the ascension of the Hekhalot mystic from one palace to the other, when in each stage he presents the "seals" which are holy names, probably engraved. Both the oral (audial) and visual aspects of the holy name are evoked in this process. See in detail: A. Kuyt, *Heavenly Journeys in Hekhalot Literature*, Ph.D. Thesis, Amsterdam 1992.

the divine life, eternal from which all temporal life derives. Then he joins the divine Name of the Everliving with the sixth Name—QAYYTUM, the Self-existing one upon whom all existence depends.”

The position of the semantic element in this system is a lesser one than in the Pseudo-Dionisian text. The first names do not denote any meaning; they are sounds (and, probably, also pictures, when written), unrelated to a specific linguistic reference. The lower names, however, are comprised from a combination of the semantic and non-semantic: they do convey the meaning of Truth, Life or Existence, yet obviously it is not just this meaning which makes them so powerful in the mystical process. The meaning ascribed to them is at least partially a negative one—truth which is beyond earthly truth, life which is beyond human life, existence which is beyond material existence. It may be surmised that the potency of these names is not derived from their position in communicative language, but in their intimate, meta-linguistic relationship to the mystical divine being. The significant aspect of this list, from the point of view of this discussion, is that those names which have a semantic level are described as lower than those who do not. The mystical power of a name is increased, when its linguistic meaning is diminished.

It is the main thesis of this discussion that the sanctity of the name in the mysticisms of the scriptural religions is derived from the fact that a name, in essence, is that part of language in which the semantic level is minimal or non-existent. Meaning, like communication, is an obstacle to the mystic's progress. The perfect mystical language is one which does not have a semantic level at all. The language of divine names, it is suggested, should be viewed as a semiotic rather than a semantic one. The following examples and analysis should elaborate this concept.

II

Nearly a quarter-century ago, Gershom Scholem published one of his most profound studies, dedicated to the holy name and the concept of language in Jewish mysticism.¹⁵ It is necessary to return to this subject because of the progress made in the last generation in the understanding of the nature of language and its place in religion and mysticism. One of the most important contributions to this renewed understanding comes, so to speak, from

¹⁵ G. Scholem, *Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala*, *Eranos Jahrbuch* 39 (1970; actually published in 1973), pp. 243-299; reprinted in *Judaica III, Studien zur Jüdischen Mystik*, Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp 1973; English translation by Simon Pleasance: *The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah*, *Diogenes* 79 (Fall, 1972), 59-80; 80 (Winter, 1972), 164-169 (also a French translation in *Diogenes*, same issues).

Scholem's own backyard: the philosophy of language, and especially the philosophy of names in language, was developed by Scholem's best friend, Walter Benjamin. One of his earliest works, published only after his death, is most pertinent to this subject: it is one of the very few studies of language ever written which deal in a profound way in the meta-human and meta-communicative nature of language.¹⁶ The last generation saw an increase in the awareness, among linguists, of the intrinsically human nature of language, as a result of the works of Noam Chomsky and his influential school. Benjamin is the representative of the opposite direction in this field. Benjamin's contention that language includes the ability of things—designated by names to address us, and that they communicate among themselves, has in it the element of a semiotic, rather than semantic, concept of language; this communication, according to Benjamin, includes dancing, mime, painting, sculpting, music, poetry, etc. The meeting-point between "language as such" and "language spoken by man" is the name-giving. In Benjamin's complex system, this process is a revelation of the innermost nature of man, as well as the closest touch with the things themselves. I believe that Benjamin (like Scholem) recognized in the process of name-creation a creativity which is not merely facilitation of communication, but also the touching between two different essences, which are both present in this occurrence.

Neither Benjamin nor Scholem used explicit religious terminology when presenting their concept of language. Yet it seems that the closest parallels to their views are to be found in the works of mystics, describing the semiotic communication between man and God. Thus, for instance, the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise on the Divine Names states:

If God cannot be grasped by mind or sense-perception, if he is not a particular being, how do we know him? This is something we must inquire into. It might be more accurate to say that we cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or of reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms. We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us and we pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion,

¹⁶ *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, included in the *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedmann, Herman Schweppenhauser, Frankfurt a/M 1972, vol. 1, p. 140. English translation: *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, in: *Reflections*, edited by P. Demetz, New York: Schocken 1986, pp. 314-333. My thanks are due to Dr. Berendan Moran, who gave me an unpublished study of his, "Walter Benjamin's Early Philosophy of Language," which I found most helpful.

imagination, name and many other things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him."¹⁷

This is a description of the semiotic system, in which all things are signs, by which the mystic can know something of God. The mystic "reads" everything in existence as an indication of the existence and nature of God, but he must be aware of the fact that God "speaks" to him in this way also by not presenting, by the absence of signs, by the "unknowing". Actual signs and missing signs play an equal part in this semiotic system, in which language is a small, insignificant part. Even so, "names" are an element selected for emphasis by the author; scriptures are not mentioned, but names are.

It is the nature of a name to refer to the thing designated in its unique individuality, conveying the specific character, and separating it from other being. What is true about generic names is doubly so concerning personal names. These do not contain a semantic level; they only designate an individual by a sign, on a semiotic level. If this personal name has a meaning (as in calling a girl by the name "Belle"), this meaning is an obstacle separating the sign from the thing designated.¹⁸ The less meaning in a name, the better it can be identified with the individual being. Therefore, the name "Allah" is thus more sacred than the appellation "All Merciful," in which the semantic level has to be ignored so that the concept of the divine could be absorbed. The name YHVH thus can become the supreme divine name, because there is no fixed, necessary semantic level to it, despite the dozens of exegetical attempts.

An example will be useful in clarifying this concept. In the beginning of the second century there seems to have been, among Jewish exegetes, a tendency to forsake the previous understanding of the Song of Songs as essentially a secular poem, describing a love-affair between King Solomon and a beautiful Jerusalemite shepherdess, and to find new dimensions of allegorical meaning in it. Generations passed until complete allegory which came into being, probably in the third century, both in Christianity's great commentary on this work by Origen of Caesarea, and in Judaism's midrashic compendium, Shir ha-Shirim Rabba.

¹⁷ Pp. 108-109.

¹⁸ In this way, I believe, we can explain the title of Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*. This novel narrates a story, told by books, to books, about books. Every passage, every character, every event, are either a direct quotation or a paraphrase of a literary or theological work. The title serves as warning (usually unheeded, especially by the makers of the movie based on this novel) that the work does not deal with the thing itself, only with its linguistic expression in the Name. The subject of the book is the divergence between things and names, in the same way that Eco's subsequent novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, deals with the divergence (and, later, congruence) between reality and scholarship. See my Introduction to the Hebrew translation of this novel, Tel Aviv: Kineret 1991, pp. 7-13.

In the early second century, there was only a partial allegorical treatment of specific verses in this work. The earliest of these is probably attested by the story of the Four Sages who Entered the Pardes,¹⁹ in which the successful mystical experience of Rabbi Akiva is hinted at by the verse "The king has brought me into his chambers,"²⁰ denoting for the first time that the "king" of this work is not Solomon but God Himself. Similarly, it is reported that Rabbi Akiva declared that the Song of Songs is the holy of holies of the scriptures, and he claimed that the book was "given" to the people of Israel (in the same terminology denoting the "giving" of the Torah by God), on Mount Sinai, a part of that supreme theophany, many centuries before King Solomon was born. (His colleague, Rabbi Eliezer, maintained that the book was "given" when the Red Sea parted to allow Israel to cross, based upon the belief that when the sea opened, the heavens opened as well and their secrets revealed.) This led to the interpretation of the first verse of the Song of Songs, which states that Solomon was its author, as meaning that it was given by "the King of Peace," God Himself.

It seems that this new attitude towards the book was expressed first and foremost by a new understanding of the verses 10-16 in the fifth chapter. In these verses, the physical characteristics of the "lover" are described—his head, hair, legs, teeth—in a most sensual manner. If the author of this work was not King Solomon, then the description is related to its true author, God Himself. Understood in this way, these verses become the most anthropomorphic description of God in the Bible, presenting the clearest appearance of God in biblical literature, making the visions of Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel pale in comparison. Ezekiel can only mumble that "an image like that of a man's above it," whereas the Song describes in detail the various limbs of the divine figure. These verses served to create the image of the *Shiur Komah*, the gigantic, anthropomorphic figure of God described in detail in a third-century Hebrew mystical treatise, which was used by all subsequent Jewish mystics in the Middle Ages and modern times.²¹

¹⁹ Tosefta Hagiga 2:4.

²⁰ Song of Songs 1:4.

²¹ On this text and its place in the history of Jewish mysticism see G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (actually, the title of this book is the rendering of the term "Shiur Komah" into English), New York: Schocken 1991, pp. 15-54; *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2nd edition, 1965, pp. 36-42, and S. Lieberman's appendix to this book, pp. 118-126. See also: P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1992, pp. 60-62, 99-102 et *passim*; J. Dan, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Tel Aviv 1989, pp. 48-58; *idem*, The Concept of Knowledge in the Shiur Komah, in: *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to A. Altmann*, edited by S. Stein and R. Loewe, University, Alabama: Alabama University Press 1979, pp. 67-74. Compare also the monograph on the subject, M.S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, Latham: Scholar's Press 1983. A comprehensive collection of early and late Shiur Komah texts

The impact of this interpretation of the Song of Songs verses was, undoubtedly, a visual one. While its development was textual and exegetical, that is, linguistic, the result carried enormous visual, sensual power, which became a potent element in Jewish meta-linguistic expressions of divine revelation. It is no wonder that the people who developed this concept in its initial stages were the Hekhalot mystics, who rebelled against midrashic hermeneutics, and believed in their ability to face God directly—in His image of the Shiur Komah. The anthropomorphic figure of God is the exact opposite of the textual, midrashic God, hiding inside the esoteric layers of biblical language.

Yet, when the most intensely mystical treatise in Hekhalot literature describes the most celebrated mystical journey in the history of Jewish mysticism—the ascension of Rabbi Akiva to the supreme seventh palace, in which God Himself resides and sits on His Throne of Glory, something unexpected happened to these verses from the Song of Songs. In the pinnacle of the mystical experience, when Rabbi Akiva was facing God directly, the holiest names of God have been revealed to him. Many of these names are ones known to us from other Hekhalot mystical treatises, and some of them have histories of their own (some information concerning their origins and development can be gleaned from the text²²); others are obscure. But among them, in a most prominent position, we find a completely different sequence of the most secret and most potent names of God. These are none other than the actual verses from the Song of Songs 5:10-16, arranged in a mysterious rhythm, the title Sabaoth (and Siboth) added to each phrase.²³

Description had thus been transformed into essence. As long as these verses were read as communicative language, they conveyed the most secret and sublime information about God, but they still dealt with information, revelation and communication. In this last phase of their development, they no longer describe, but are the subject of description; they do not convey the nature of God, but are the concentration of God's essence. Their linguistic

was presented by Cohen in the volume: *The Shiur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1985. An attempt to find a connection between the Shiur Komah and talmudic literature see: M. Bar-Ilan, The Hand of God: A Chapter in Rabbinic Anthropomorphism, in: G. Sed-Rajna (editor) *Rashi, Homage à E.E. Urbach*, Paris: Cerf 1993, pp. 321-335. Compare also: A. Farber-Ginat, Studies in the Shiur Komah, in: M. Oron, A. Goldreich (editors), *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. E. Gottlieb*, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1994, pp. 361-393.

²² An example is the "name of eights," Azboga, which is comprised of the three pairs of Hebrew letters which together give the number eight. Scholem tended to see a connection between this name and the gnostic ogdoas, see J. Dan, "The Name of Eights," in: *Minha le-Sarah, Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah dedicated to Prof. Sarah Heller-Willensky*, ed. by M. Idel, D. Dimant, S. Rosenberg, Jerusalem: Magnes 1994, pp. 119-134.

²³ See J. Dan, The Chambers of the Chariot, *Tarbiz* 46 (1978), pp. 49-56. The text has been published in P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1981, §419.

form is retained, but their communicative nature is forsaken. The semantic unit has been transformed into a mystical sign.

Following this example, we can define a sacred name of God as that linguistic expression of the divine which is not communicative, it just is, representing in a linguistic form the inexpressible essence of God Himself. Such a concept represents the belief that God not only inspired scriptures and communicated His truth and wisdom to man, but that He Himself actually exists in the scriptures, in those phrases which are non-communicative and essentially meaningless—אלהים, שדי, צבאوت, אדני, ידוה and all the others. They do not have any literal meaning (although, throughout history, they accumulated hundreds and thousands of interpretations). They do not convey, inform, or describe, they are the essence of God.

The history of the creation and exegesis of holy names of God in Judaism is characterized by a consistent attempt to divorce language from meaning. The example just presented is an extreme one, because it demonstrates how a passage of meaningful language, probably originally a love-song in which the female lover describes the physical beauty of her male beloved, became a sequence of letters signifying the innermost mystery of the Godhead, losing all elements of conveying a message; signs being completely divorced from their signifiers. In most cases the very beginning of such a process is meaningless. The clearest example is to be found in a much more central name than the verses in the Song of Songs, a group of three verses in Exodus (14:19-21) describing the safe passage of the Jews through the Red Sea when fleeing the pursuing Egyptian army. This seems to me to present a perfect example of the difference between human and divine language, and the impossibility of conceiving a divine language in translation. The verses read:

19. And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them. 20. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night. 21. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

This is rather straightforward, literal narration. In the Hebrew original there are some syntactic difficulties, but on the whole this passage can in no way be described as uniquely obscure or suggestive. There is nothing in the text which can denote that these verses contain one of the greatest mysteries of God, which Jewish exegetes, esoterics, and mystics discussed in books not intended for the public for fifteen centuries. These verses constitute the Secret Name of Seventy-Two Characters, a secret transmitted in whispers from generation to generation. A passage dedicated to its description is included in

the first work of the kabbalah, the book *Bahir*, and several Ashkenazi Hasidic commentaries were written on it in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. People in many generations trembled at the mention of this secret.

These three verses are unique in the whole Bible in one strange respect: Each of them contains, in Hebrew, exactly 72 letters:

ויסע מלאך האלהים ההלך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם ויסע עמוד הענן
מפניהם ויעמד מאחריהם.
ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן והחשך ויאמר את הלילה ולא
קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה.
ויש משה את ידו על הים ויולך יהוה את הים ברוח קדים עזה כל הלילה וישם את
הים לחרבה ויבקעו המים.

In order to create the holy name, the middle verse has to be written from end to beginning. The source of the idea may have been rooted in the fact that the last word in this verse, "the night," is a word which can be read exactly the same from beginning to end or end to beginning (buxtraphe-don); it probably should be translated as "eve" instead of "the night." After writing the middle verse in this way, the text should be read upside-down, forming 72 groups of three letters, beginning with ודו, that is, the first letter of the first verse, the last letter of the middle verse, the first letter of the third verse; followed by יל, the second letter of the first verse, the one-before-last of the second verse, and the second letter of the third verse, and so on, seventy-two times.

The result of this process is a meaningless sequence of 216 letters, divided into 72 groups of 3 each, almost none of which constitutes a recognizable word. A series of three relatively comprehensible and communicative sentences has been turned into a heap of gibberish, completely divorced from any kind of meaning, yet containing a strange, suggestive numerical symmetry. We do not know when this name was formed; traditions about its existence are found in Late Antiquity, yet it is not associated with any definite, recognizable school of Jewish esoterics or mystics. Once it was formed, it was used by all Hebrew writers dealing with the secrets of the holiest name of all.

An example of its use in a relatively recent period may indicate its potency. Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, the author of the first published work of the Hasidic movement in the 18th century, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, published in 1780, tells in the name of his teacher, the Besht, the founder of the movement, a detailed, erotic story, derived from a medieval folktale found also in the *Decameron*. This story includes an episode in which a lover abducts his beloved, taking her in a ship, masked as an evil sailor, and raping her on the journey. The Besht offered an allegorical interpretation of this story, as a chapter in the history of the intricate relationship between God and Israel, according to which God sometimes hides his real face and seems to be an

evil power torturing Israel, whereas at the end it is revealed that it was all done out of love. The evil sailor is the devil, but, states the Besht, sometimes God Himself assumes the guise of the devil. The frequent name of Satan in kabbalistic tradition is Samael, and this is the one used by the Besht in the interpretation of this story. He then states: the name Samael can be conceived as the word within which hides the very holy name, Sal; when God masquerades as the devil, Sal is transformed to Samael. Sal, of course, is one of the 72 groups of letters derived from these verses, and its proximity to the name Samael was already used by 13th-century kabbalists in Spain.²⁴

It seems that this example demonstrates clearly the process in which the Holy Name of God is first divorced from any linguistic meaning, being presented as a pure linguistic construction expressing only symmetry and form but no content, and then, by the use of simple midrashic exegetical methods, particular meanings are being returned to parts of the name, which is then used as a new source of divine truth, a new-old revealed text to be interpreted and utilized in the deciphering of the eternal message of God to Man.

Another example, from a completely different field, of this process of the destruction of meaning, can be found in the mystical work of early Jewish mysticism, *Hekhalot Rabbati*. This work abounds with *nomina barbara*, relating to a wide range of powers of the divine pleroma as seen by those mystics. There are, in this work, several sequences of letters, completely meaningless, presented as the names of God. A classical scholar who studied them discovered, unexpectedly, that many of them are actual words or even sentences in Greek, transliterated into Hebrew characters and thus losing their linguistic message. One of these was proved to be the Greek names of the four elements—air, fire, water and earth, which have become a pile of Hebrew letters, devoid of any meaning, constituting a hidden, mysterious, name of God. This attitude was prevalent in Late Antiquity, when Jews seem to use Greek to lend an air of mystery to the names they employ, whereas Greek-speaking esoterics and magicians seem to prefer Hebrew sacred names as very potent ones in their pantheon of secret names. This direction was also followed by many gnostic sects, who used, in many ways, Hebrew biblical terms as indicating mysterious, mythological powers in their story of the creation and catastrophe. Their works abound with names like Adonaios, Elohaios, Saddaios, Sabaoth and the like. One of the most enigmatic names in the gnostic mythology, that of Yaldabaoth, the evil lion-shaped creator, is, most probably, also a Hebrew condensation of the biblical divine names

²⁴ An analysis of this story is included in my *The Hasidic Story*, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House 1975, pp. 40-46.

of Ya Elohim Adonai Zevaot, found in several Late-Antiquity Hebrew esoteric and mystical texts. The gnostics, presumably, heard these sequences of names and condensed, rather than constructed, a combined name to denote the totality of the God of Israel, the creator, who embodied worldly evil in their eyes. Suggestions seeing this name as an artificial gnostic construct from semitic components do not seem to be well founded, for they have no counterpart in any ancient literature, and there is no proof that the gnostic ever used such constructs from semitic roots (they certainly did so from Greek components).

One of the undeciphered mysteries in Hebrew names of God, hitherto unexplained, is the celebrated name of 42 letters, usually presented as seven groups of six letters: קדעשמן, אבניחץ etc. The name is found in acronymic form in prayers, but it is doubtful whether this is the source: it is more probable that these poetic formulations were made following this name. It seems that it was well known in classical rabbinic Judaism, though the full name is found only in somewhat later sources. Again, the most important aspect of this name is the complete absence of literal meaning, this absence understood as expressing its relation to God's essence rather than His message.

One of the expressions of this attitude is found in Jewish art, in which the tetragrammaton has been stylized in various forms to create a decorative symbol. Some Jewish mystics combined this element with a frequent kabbalistic practice of stylizing artistically the image of the ten *sefirot*, in an anthropomorphic picture or that of a structure or of a tree, and presented the *sefirot* and the Name as one symbol, which had a religious, and sometimes mystical, message. It was designed as a fulfilment of the demand presented in verses which attach a visionary element to the divine image, an image one has to contemplate.²⁵ The word is thus transformed into an intricate visual symbol which can be used for contemplation and mystical absorption.²⁶

In the light of these basic attitudes we can better understand the generalizations presented by medieval kabbalists concerning the relationship between the Holy Name and the torah. The Nachmanides statement that the whole

²⁵ Ps. 16:8.

²⁶ This phenomenon has recently been used (or, actually, misused) in: S. Parpola, *The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy*, JNES 52 (1993), pp. 161-207. The author maintains that the kabbalistic concept of the ten *sefirot* and their depiction as a tree is found in the second millennium B.C. (when it is actually a product of late-12th century speculation), and he identifies it with the Tree of Life (an identification which is found in Jewish sources only three millennia later). The author does not rely on written texts but mainly on various drawings, including that of the tetragrammaton as a tree. He "relies" on some of my papers and books as well as those of Scholem and others, while every sentence in these publications completely negates this arbitrary thesis.

torah is nothing but the names of God, followed by the more extreme statement that the whole torah is the name of God, achieves one thing: it denies the originality of the divine message cast in language as the original stratum of the torah, and sees it as a secondary, accidental one. The whole vast body of midrashic hermeneutics is not a decipherment of more and more layers of meaning within the text of a meaningful message, but all these layers are superimposed on a text which is devoid of any original meaning. These statements, before doing anything else, deny the element of communication in any way, on any level, from the torah. While the midrash treats the torah as an inexhaustible text of infinite meanings, the mystic who identifies it with the Secret Name of God actually treats the text of the torah as huge, blank scroll, as far as meaning is concerned, on which any meaning can be written. The literal message of the word of God has thus completely disappeared. Instead of a message, the torah is the essence.

Another metaphor, more contemporary in character, which can be used concerning the relationship between the name of God and meaningful, communicative language, is that of the black hole. The name of God is so meaningful, so intensely reflective of the divine wisdom, that nothing can escape from it or can be discerned from it. It is the supreme concentration of divine essence, transcending everything. Yet the mystical attitude towards language is most clearly expressed here: Despite all this, the name is still language. The essence of God, or the best possible approximation of it to be present in the distant horizon of human conception, is a linguistic structure. It is not a picture, a vision, an emotion, but a text. This text is conceived in a radically different way from that of human language or even of midrashic concept of divine language, but it is still language. The mystical theories of the nature of the torah and of the Name of God strengthen the intrinsic identity between God and Language.

One of the most intricate relationships between Name and Vision is that of the *Shiur Komah*, the central and most potent symbol in Jewish mysticism. On the face of it, this is the supreme expression of visionary mysticism: it embodies the need for a physical, anthropomorphic, visual contact with the Godhead, meeting in it the supreme combination of the familiar and the unknown, the components of humanity and the dimensions of unimaginable myth. On another level, the *Shiur Komah* is the text: it is the intrinsic meaning of the Song of Songs verses, it is a compendium of linguistic symbols exhausting biblical texts; but on another level yet, it is a collection of *nomina barbara*, to sacred names original and traditional, uniting together to create the "blank page" on which mystical truth is to be represented.

The most emphatic statement of this attitude was made in the second decade of the thirteenth century by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, presenting a tradition which existed for several generations in his family, the Kalonymus

family in the Rhineland, and most notably his great teacher, Rabbi Judah ben Kalonymus the Pious. Rabbi Eleazar presented his most esoteric tradition in his extensive work, *sefer ha-shem*, The Book of the Name. This work has never been printed, but it is found in several manuscripts.²⁷

Rabbi Eleazar began his discussion of the holy name by describing a ceremony of "handing over the name" from a rabbi to his disciple, conducted alongside a river or a body of water, in which appropriate verses, mainly from the Psalm, were recited.²⁸ After the conclusion of the ceremony, a long period of study begins, and the *sefer ha-shem* seems to be a summary of the esoteric teachings concerning the tetragrammaton and other holy names. In this work, Rabbi Eleazar represents one direction in the mystical concept of the holy name in medieval Judaism, that of the investigation of the comprehensiveness of the spiritual meaning of a group of letters, their inclusion within themselves of all meanings, all phenomena, the inner essence of all existence. This approach expresses the feeling that the physical symbol, the written name, is fused completely with the abstract concept of God as a totality of all spirituality and meaning. Within the name, all differences and contradictions are united, as they are within God, because the name *is* God. Rabbi Eleazar does not even use the Torah as a mediator, as did Nachmanide: The name, the Tetragrammaton, is completely identified with the Godhead, a thorough fusion of symbol and symbolized, between the signifier and the signified. Language is not a means by which God is achieved, because it is God himself. To the best of my knowledge, such a union of a linguistic element and the essence of the supreme divinity cannot be found elsewhere in Western culture, though some close parallels may be pointed out in Islam and in Eastern mysticism.

The concept of language in ancient Hinduism is essentially similar to that of Judaism: Language, the Word, is the embodiment of divine power of creation, not of communication. The divine power Vac, which is both a God

²⁷ The most important manuscripts are Munich 81, (which is probably a copy of) British Library 737. This manuscript was in the possession of the Cardinal Edigio de Viterbo in the end of the 15th century, who was one of the first Catholic Hebraists and the founder of the Christian kabbalah. His notes abound in the margins of the manuscript. The book, *sefer ha-shem*, is the third part of Rabbi Eleazar's series of esoteric theological works, called by him *sodey razzaya* ("Secrets of Secrets," the title is numerically equivalent to his name, Eleazar). The others are: *The Secret of Genesis*, *The Secret of the Chariot*, *The Wisdom of the Soul* and the *Commentary on the Sefer Yezira*. Several manuscripts of this collection were collected by the great Prague bibliophil of the eighteenth century, Rabbi David Oppenheim, and are housed now at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

²⁸ G. Scholem published a translation of this introduction and analyzed it briefly in his study of the transmission of mystical secrets in Judaism. See: *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated from the German by Karl Manheim, New York: Schocken 1965, p. 132. The Hebrew text was published by me in *The Esoteric Theology of the Ashkenazi Hasidim*, Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute 1968, pp. 115-121.

and the Word, is credited in the *ṛgveda* as the power of creation.²⁹ The concept of *tantra*, the holy syllable OM, and many other examples convey the same semiotic attitude and the negation of the semantic level of language, as does the Hebrew mystical use of the tetragrammaton. This is not the result of any Hindu influence on medieval kabbalah, as some would like to think. This is an expression of the basic diversion between the two irreconcilable concepts of language: the semantic, communicative one, according to which language is a human phenomenon and communication is its essence, and the opposing one, that of the divine language, according to which language is a divine phenomenon of inexhaustible meaning on every semiotic level. The tantric attitude is a vigorous demonstration of the infinity of meaning and power within a word or a syllable, which could not be accepted by cultures based on the Greek, Hellenistic and Latin concepts of the humanity of language.

This is only one direction in the interpretation and use of the holy name, exemplified forcefully by Rabbi Eleazar's *sefer ha-shem*. The opposite direction in Jewish mysticism is also apparent; the process of differentiation, of discovering within the name the various aspects of which the Godhead, and ultimately the whole universe with its infinite number of phenomena, is comprised. The theological basis is one and the same: the comprehensiveness of the name, its inclusion within it of all divine and earthly existence. It is a matter of emphasis, whether the mystic concentrates on seeing within the name of totality and unity of everything, or whether he dedicates himself to deciphering how all the multiple aspects of the divine are to be found within the name. Most mystics, and almost all kabbalists, dedicated themselves to the second task.

The origin of this approach precedes mysticism, and is to be found in talmudic and midrashic literature. The source is to be found in a hermeneutical question: if God is one, and His name one, why is it that scriptures use different names for Him? The problem was usually discussed within the framework of the creation story, and was intertwined with the other uncomfortable elements in that biblical narrative which could cast some doubt over the unity of God. The talmudic explanation of the use of the names YHVH and Elohim in the creation story did indeed divide the divine realm into two aspects: the name YHVH indicates God's mercy, whereas the name Elohim indicates the aspect of judgment and severity.³⁰ This rabbinic distinction does not imply a division within the Godhead.³¹ It is a metaphor,

²⁹ Andre Padoux, *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1990.

³⁰ See E.E. Urbach, *The Sages—Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1975, vol. I, pp. 37-40 et *passim*.

³¹ Some recent attempts to see in this explanation an element of a mythical concept of the

denoting two aspects of divine providence for the world. In the same way that when God judges the world He "sits on a throne of justice" while at other times He "sits on a throne of mercy," He metaphorically wears different names when he conducts the universe in these two manners.

An example of the transformation of this concept by medieval mystics is to be found in the opening section of the treatise *Sod ha-Sodot* by Rabbi Elhanan ben Yakar of London, written about 1225.³² According to Rabbi Elhanan, who quotes and develops the rabbinic distinction between mercy and justice concerning the two names of God present in the creation narrative, Elohim is also the name indicating the creative power of God, the eternal Godhead in His capacity as Creator; the name YHVH indicates a secondary divine power, which is more in the nature of an emanated, rather than eternal, divine entity. The process of creation, according to Rabbi Elhanan, is also the process of the evolvement of YHVH from Elohim; and the Sabbath, which represents the completion of the creation process, is also the celebration of the renewed unity between the supreme Godhead, Elohim, and the emanated divine power YHVH. They come together, he says, like body and soul, and, like them, are inseparable.³³ YHVH is described as identical with the *kavod*, the divine glory, which is the power responsible for divine presence within the universe, of miracles, and for contact between God and man in prayers and in prophetic visions.

The rabbinic metaphor concerning the modes of divine providence has been transformed into as meaningful division within the divine world and the emergence of a pleromatic concept of that realm. The different names indicate different essences, which have divergent positions concerning time, the universe and man. Elohim is eternal, YHVH is emanated in time; Elohim is the Creator, YHVH functions within the created universe; Elohim is transcendent, present as a "soul" within everything, YHVH communicates with man as an individual, separate entity.³⁴ The unity between God and His

Godhead in talmudic tradition seem to me to be completely detached from the rabbinic context. See, for instance, Y. Liebes, *Studies in Myth and Messianism*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1992, pp. 7-61.

³² This important theological treatise has not been printed. It is found in two manuscripts at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (a provisional copy has been published by me at Academion, Jerusalem 1977, in a collection of Ashkenazi Hasidic esoteric texts). Concerning Rabbi Elhanan and his works see now: J. Dan, *The Circle of the Unique Cherub: A Jewish Mystical Group in Medieval Germany*, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), in press. One of Rabbi Elhanan's sources may have been the now-lost treatise *Raza Raba*, one of the esoteric works of the early Middle Ages which seems to have reached this circle, and which included discussions of the holy name.

³³ He uses an unusual Hebrew verb, נִתְּוָמוּ, to express this unity: they "became twins," a term which brings to mind the gnostic use of the Greek term σπλῆνῆς.

³⁴ The concept of Elohim as the supreme divine power is derived from the terminology of

name has been transformed into a number of names expressing the various aspects of the divine pleroma.

The history of mystical speculations in Judaism in the Middle Ages and early modern times is, to a very large extent, the history of the definitions of the nature of the divine pleroma and the inter-relationship between the various divine names, which have become symbols of the pleromatic powers. The book *Bahir*, the earliest work of the kabbalah, is the clearest expression of this attitude, and it includes the most detailed division of divine names and their powers before the kabbalah became established.

It seems that the earliest discussion of the nature of the name of God in a language other than Hebrew is found in the works of Philo of Alexandria. Philo was the first theologian known to us to be confronted with the paradox of dealing with questions concerning sanctity in linguistic terms, without accepting the dominance of the Hebrew language, in practice if not in principle. A few years after his time, Philo was joined by many other theologians, when the early Christian writers began to interpret the Hebrew scriptures in Greek.³⁵ Philo followed Plato in his mistrust of spoken language,³⁶ and preferred the intrinsic, purely spiritual language of the mind, unpronounced, and therefore undifferentiated into specific languages. When describing the naming of the animals of Adam, Philo does not elucidate the divine nature of language or the essential connection between a being and its name. He insists, in apparent controversy with Epicurus and Lucretius, that Adam's names must have been the most successful, both because of his superior wisdom, and because of his ability to transmit his wisdom to all humanity, being the father of all. Philo does not indicate that the process of naming involved anything superhuman or divine; it can be described as a supreme achievement of human wisdom rather than as an expression of a truth beyond man. He insists, however, that Adam could not name himself; naming others does not enable one to understand himself so well as to be able to properly give oneself the correct appellation. This passage seems to touch upon the nature of the name of God: Man, Philo concludes, cannot name anything that he cannot understand; the name of God, therefore, cannot be conceived by man.

the *Sefer Yezira*, which viewed the "Spirit of the Living God" (= Elohim) of Genesis 1:2 as the first and supreme power.

³⁵ Another example is that of Josephus Flavius, who rendered into Greek many Jewish concepts, yet it seems that the more abstract problems of the nature of language and the difference between Hebrew and Greek were not paramount in his thought.

³⁶ See: David Winston, *Aspects of Philo's Linguistic Theory*, The *Studia Philonica* Annual vol. III (= *Festschrift Earle Hilgert*), 1991 (edited by David T. Runia, Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA, pp. 109-125; compare also: L.L. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation: The Hebrew Names in Philo*, Brown Judaic Series 115 (Atlanta 1988); C.W. Chilton, *The Epicurean Theory*

III

The distancing of language from the semantic level in the mystical concept of the divine name can be clearly demonstrated by the process in which mystics selected the names to which they attributed the most supreme, secret significance. The name YHVH, which has the least meaning among biblical names of God, became the most significant one in Jewish esotericism and mysticism. Its designation as the "tetragrammaton," both in Hebrew³⁷ and in Greek indicates the absence of meaning; it can be described only by its external structure, because no synonym for it exists, and no semantic definition or description is possible. A more detailed example of this process can be found in 13th century kabbalah, concerning the biblical term "amen."

The absence of a semantic level for this word is evident in the fact that, despite its place in biblical poetry, it could not be translated, and has been included in the Christian scriptures in its Hebrew form (like "halleluja" and a handful of similar terms). In the early kabbalah, this term acquired a unique position, as the embodiment of the characteristics of the divine world as a whole. T. Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, in the early 13th century, presented this concept in the strongest terms. In his commentary on the talmudic traditions, he included a detailed discussion of the talmudic statement that the person answering "amen" after a blessing is greater than the one saying the blessing itself.³⁸ This paradoxical formulation is explained by the kabbalist as the result of the fact that the letters AMN include in them all the secret names of the emanated divine powers, which do have, at least partially, some meaning, like the terms for "faith" אמונה and "trust" אומן, which refer, according to him, to specific *sefirot*.³⁹ The hidden divine source is beyond any linguistic meaning; it is just a root, two syllables which do not combine to convey any communicative message. As the divine powers evolve and descend towards the created cosmos, they acquire some elements of specific meaning, as they assume individual characteristics and specific divine functions. The ladder

of the Origin of Language: A Study of Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragments X and XI, *AJPh* 13 (1962), pp. 159-167.

³⁷ The Greek term tetragrammaton has been used in Hebrew works, mainly as an appellation of celestial and divine powers, like Totrosiai in Hekhalot Rabbati, and probably the name Metatron, one of the most important powers in ancient and medieval Jewish speculations concerning the divine world, also includes the word tetra. See J. Dan, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, p. 82.

³⁸ ברוך העונה אמן יחדיו מן המכבד, Bavli Berkhos 57b (and compare the end of Bavli Nazir).

³⁹ The text was published by Isaiah Tishby, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1945 (2nd edition, 1984). It seems that it was edited into an anonymous tradition attributed to a legendary figure "Rabbi Yekutiel," at the end of the 13th century or the beginning of the 14th. See J. Dan, *The Worms Epistle and the Problem of Pseudepigraphy in the Early Kabbalah*, in: J. Dan, J. Hacker (editors), *Studies in Kabbalah and Ethical Literature in Honor of Isaiah Tishby*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1987, pp. 111-138.

leading from earthly existence into the hidden realms of the divine mystical truth is a ladder leading away from meaning, from semantics to semiotics. The sign is becoming The Sign.⁴⁰

This phenomenon can be exemplified by many characteristics of the use of names in mysticism. Kabbalists and esoterics seemed even to prefer the name MZPZ to YHVH, a name reached by the transmutation of the tetragrammaton by the system of ETBS.⁴¹ The more mysterious nature of this unpronounceable "word" is more satisfying for the mystic who tries to designate the enormous distance between semantic expression and mystical, meta-linguistic and Truth. The tendency to create *nomina barbara* is expressed even in the explication of the names of the most supreme realms of the Godhead. The concept of the letters of the alphabet in the *Sefer ha-Temunah* is another example of the rejection of the semantic element in language.⁴²

There is an element of similarity between this process in mystical speculations concerning the name of God, and the attitude towards secret names in the various magical traditions. The common characteristics should not hide the vast differences between the two phenomena. In mysticism as in magic, the name is the essence of entities and the expression of their power. Both see language as semiotic rather than semantic, and tend to emphasize the mysterious, meaningless names of the powers they address. The difference, however, is that magic creates a language, while mysticism denies it. For the magician, the secret name of a celestial power, the source of its essence and power, is accurate and meaningful. The correct, careful use of this name necessarily results in the achievement of specific, often material, goals. Precision of expression is indispensable for the magician: in order for the formula to work, it must be said (and, sometimes, some physical actions also have to take place) and performed exactly as instructed. In this sense, the magician

⁴⁰ This can be compared to the process which transformed the Hebrew name "Jerusalem" into an abstract designation of supreme spirituality in Christianity. The earthly Jerusalem became, in Christian spirituality, a reference to a hidden, unattainable source of divine benevolence. One of the most meaningful levels of the historical controversy within Christianity concerning the Crusades was the clash between the physical and the spiritual significance of this name. Those who viewed it as a purely spiritual term did not see any meaning in the actual presence of a Christian kingdom in the earthly place called by that name, while for their opponents believed that the acquisition of the earthly Jerusalem brings them closer to the spiritual goal expressed by this term. In Judaism, "Jerusalem" retained its physical designation until the late 18th century, when some Hasidic writers began to use it in an abstract, spiritual manner. See concerning the whole subject: Paula Frederiksen and Joseph Dan, Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Moslem Spirituality, in: *Jerusalem*, edited by Nitza Rosovsky, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (forthcoming). Concerning Jerusalem in Hasidic thought see Rivka Shatz, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992.

⁴¹ This is the simplest among the methodologies of *temurah*, in which the first letter of the alphabet is substituted by the last, the second by the one before the last, and so on.

⁴² Concerning this work see G. Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah*, edited by R.I. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986, pp. 460-463.

is the creator of a system of signs (not symbols), that congregate to create a language, which is used in strictly constructed structures (the "grammar" of magic).⁴³ The language of magic cannot tolerate any ambiguity of any sort. If the formula is not expressed precisely, it is a meaningless heap of syllables. When correctly employed in a magical procedure, the most bizarre name is nothing but an accurate designation of "the power which governs this realm," which is ordered to perform the requested action. The insistent efforts of magicians to distance their language from common, everyday language is a substitution of an accurate set of semantic signifiers to replace the inaccurate, ambiguous meanings of communicative language—very much like the usage of formulae and signs by scientists to replace the inaccuracy of words.

The mystic, on the other hand, does not deny a particular set of semantic signs. He rejects the very idea that anything linguistic, including magical as well as mathematical formulae, can express divine truth. The infinity of wisdom and knowledge in the divine realm cannot be expressed by any linguistic system. The concepts of truth and of accuracy are mutually exclusive: either you say something precise, or you say something which is true; you cannot do both. In order to approach truth, one has to forsake communicative meanings completely, and use words—if at all—as imprecise, ambiguous and vague symbols.

It seems that the confusion between mysticism and magic in their use of language, especially divine names and *nomina barbara*, contributed more than anything else to the misunderstanding of the role of language in mysticism. Once we disassociate "mysticism" from its common usage as anything supernatural, miraculous or intensely religious, or even the unknown in general, and accept the specific meaning of the term as designated by the mystics themselves, the separation between magic and mysticism becomes evident. Mystical language represents the rejection of magical language together with any other language of communication, replacing them with semiotic signs representing the unknown and the meta-linguistic in an imprecise, non-semantic manner.

⁴³ This is not unlike the system by which mathematics is expressed, when only the precise use of accurately-defined signs can produce the desired result. It is very difficult for the modern scholar to overcome prejudices and view magic as it is—a precise science, rather than a vague, confused assemblance of excidental elements resulting from superstition and the belief in the supernatural. Yet it should be recognized that nowhere else in human disciplines did the semantic level of language acquire such complete dominance.